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ABSTRACT

Approximately 83,000 students are taking Chinese language instruction in 634 Chinese heritage community language schools in the United States. These schools date to 1848 and serve immigrant groups wishing to preserve their heritage and promote children's ethnic identity. Both for-profit and non-profit Chinese language schools exist, the former mostly serving young children and the latter generally operated by parent volunteers and affiliated with ethnic or religious organizations. Some have partially-compensated teachers. Nonprofit schools operate only on weekends or after regular school hours, with funding from tuition and fund-raising. Differences in age, family background, and language competence make student placement difficult. Classes are organized variously as Mandarin Chinese-only, Mandarin as a second language, and Chinese language high school credit classes. Weekend, after-school, and summer programs are offered. Mandarin Chinese language and Chinese culture dominate the curriculum, using instructional materials published in Taiwan or the People's Republic of China. Since 1900 these schools have operated successfully outside the public school system, but links are developing. Some high schools grant credit to students taking classes in the Chinese language schools. In 1994 the Scholastic Assessment Test II in Chinese was introduced. (MSE)

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ERIC Clearinghouse On Languages and Linguistics
Center for Applied Linguistics

Digest

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Theresa Hsu Chao, Founder, National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools

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Digest

June 1997

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Chinese Heritage Community Language Schools in the United States

Theresa Hsu Chao, Founder, National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools

This digest is drawn from *A View from Within: A Case Study of Chinese Heritage Community Language Schools in the United States* (Xueying Wang, Ed.), published by the National Foreign Language Center, 1619 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036. (202)667-8100.

Chinese heritage community language schools (referred to here as Chinese language schools) are an integral part of the Chinese community in cities across the United States. According to a recent study by the National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools, approximately 82,675 students are taking Chinese in 634 language schools across the country.

Chinese language schools in the United States date back as far as 1848, to the time of the immigration of Chinese laborers. To serve the needs of those early immigrants, classes in Cantonese were held for the residents of Chinatown in a number of large U.S. cities. In 1905, the emperor of the Ch'ing Dynasty dispatched his Secretary of Justice to the United States to identify and assess the needs of Chinese communities here. In his report, the Secretary recommended that the Chinese government fund the establishment of formal Chinese language schools in Chinese communities. Further consultation with the Chinese Consulate and leaders of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association led to the founding of several Chinese language schools in San Francisco. Others were subsequently established in New York and Chicago. The founding of China as a republic in 1911 provided additional incentives for establishing Chinese language schools in the United States. In the 1930s, Los Angeles, San Diego, Washington, New Orleans, Minneapolis, and Oakland were among the cities with one or more schools.

Following the political turmoil in Asia after World War II and the relaxation of immigration regulations in 1965, the United States experienced a new influx of well-educated immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong. These immigrants and their families became permanent residents or naturalized citizens of the United States. Motivated by a strong desire to preserve their Chinese heritage and promote the ethnic identity of their children, these Chinese immigrants established family-oriented schools in which they taught their own youngsters.

The Status of Chinese Language Schools

There exist both for-profit and nonprofit Chinese language schools. For-profit schools include mostly kindergartens, child care centers, and tutorial programs for secondary school students. Nonprofit Chinese language schools consist of those operated entirely by volunteers and those run by voluntary administrators and board members with the assistance of a small, partially compensated teaching staff. Nonprofit Chinese language schools are usually affiliated with nonprofit organizations such as Chinese-American associations or religious organizations.

Administrative Structure of Nonprofit Schools. Nonprofit Chinese language schools are operated by parents and are open only on weekends or after regular school hours. When children enroll in this type of school, their parents automatically become members of the school's administrative body, which formulates and adopts bylaws and elects the board of directors, the principal, and administrative officials. In some schools, the board of directors is responsible for electing the principal and administrative officials. Small schools may have no board members; medium to large schools may have anywhere from 3 to 30 board members. The board of directors meets regularly during the semester to set policies and directives regarding school administration, school activities, teaching materials, and teaching methods. Faculty and administrative staff are hired by the board or nominated by the principal with final approval from the board.

The principal is responsible for overall operation of the school. In small schools with no board members, principals are often burdened with both teaching and administrative duties. In schools with 200 to 300 students, the administrative structure is often comparable to that of an accredited school. In schools with more than 500 students, the principal has educational and administrative duties comparable to those of a principal of a public high school.

Financial Resources. The funding of Chinese language schools generally comes from tuition and fundraising. Only a few schools, primarily those connected with religious organizations, are tuition-free. Most Chinese language schools charge $70 to $250 per student for each 10- to 17-week semester (3 hours of classes per weekend). Afterschool programs are open 3 hours a day on weekdays; their tuition is comparable to that of daycare centers.

School boards seek donations from local businesses, institutions, and individuals. Schools also raise funds by sponsoring dinners, dance parties, picnics, and exhibits, and by selling gift certificates.

Human Resources. Chinese language schools rely mainly on parent volunteers, who donate time and pool their skills to run the schools without financial compensation. In larger schools, there may not be enough parent volunteers to assume all the responsibilities of running the school. In such cases, mandatory *Parent Service Plan* programs are implemented that encourage parents to share school responsibilities. Under this plan, the workload is divided more evenly among all parents. Before the semester begins, the school board calculates the total hours of service needed to operate the school and divides the workload by the number of parents with children enrolled in the school. Each parent is required to work a certain number of hours during the semester. To ensure that the system is fair, parents are asked to make a cash deposit at the beginning of the semester to guarantee their services. The number of volunteer service hours provided by each parent is recorded. Those who fail to work their required hours do not get their deposit refunded. This system has been widely adopted by Chinese language schools in southern California and has been credited with enhancing parental understanding of school activities, promoting team spirit among parents, effectively tapping parents' professional expertise to enrich school curricula, and alleviating an increasingly heavy burden on the administrative and teaching staff.

Some schools also recruit high school and university students as volunteers. In recognition, these students are awarded community service certificates.

Student Placement. Differences in age, family background, and competence in Mandarin make student placement difficult. To address the needs of all students, classes held in Chinese language

schools are organized in the following categories.

Mandarin Chinese Only Classes. In small schools, students of different ages and varying levels of Mandarin are grouped in one class because of the limited number of teachers. Schools with 150 or more students group students according to compatible levels of Mandarin. Ideally, students are also grouped by age. Schools with 300 or more students usually group students by both age and level of Chinese. The age span is one or two years in beginning classes and two to four years in mid-level and advanced classes.

Mandarin Chinese as a Second Language Classes. Modeled after English as a second language programs, these classes are for students who speak only English or who speak another Chinese dialect. Classes emphasize listening and speaking with the goal of placing students in regular Mandarin classes within a year or two.

Chinese Language High School Credit Classes are designed for students in Grades 9-12 and cover listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Students who complete these classes successfully are granted credits accepted by certain regular high schools.

Programs Offered in Chinese Language Schools. Three types of programs are generally offered in Chinese language schools: weekend, afterschool, and summer. In *weekend programs*, classes are held 3 hours a week on Friday evening or on Saturday or Sunday. In general, 2 hours are devoted to language learning and 1 hour is reserved for cultural activities or field trips. Some schools devote all 3 hours to language learning. In *afterschool programs*, classes are held in public high schools from about 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. Classes include one hour of Mandarin Chinese, one hour of Chinese culture, and one hour of tutorial lessons in English, mathematics, or other homework. Afterschool programs have become very popular with parents and students. In *summer programs*, classes are held for 3 hours or more each weekday. Nationwide, 15% of Chinese language schools offer summer programs for 6 to 8 weeks. In southern California, the rate is 28%. These programs are particularly effective because they provide intensive language training.

Curriculum and Chinese Language Tests. Mandarin language and Chinese culture dominate the curriculum of these programs. The primary and secondary school texts used most frequently are published in Taiwan or the People's Republic of China. Generally, one volume per year is taught in weekend programs and two volumes in afterschool programs. Teachers often prepare supplementary materials for their students. Cultural classes are electives that include calligraphy, history, folk dance, chess, origami, martial arts, brush painting, public speech, drama, and ball games. Some Chinese language schools also offer mathematics and computer courses in Chinese.

A number of Chinese language tests, such as those developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, have been used to assess students' language abilities. Because students in Chinese language schools are mostly Chinese heritage students who already possess rudimentary language skills, classes have traditionally emphasized only reading and writing skills. Schools are now developing textbooks that focus on listening and speaking skills in conjunction with the traditional emphasis on reading and writing.

Chinese Language Schools and the U.S. Education System

Since the early 1900s, Chinese language schools have operated successfully outside the U.S. education system. In Chinese language schools, programs are tailored for students of Chinese descent, and classes are generally conducted in Mandarin. Chinese programs in U.S. schools, on the other hand, are designed mainly for students not of Chinese descent, and classes tend to focus on practical usage of Mandarin.

Recent developments have contributed to the recognition that a link should be established between these programs:

- An increasing number of students of non-Chinese heritage are enrolling in Chinese language schools.
- An increasing number of students of Chinese descent who attended Chinese language schools are now taking Chinese in U.S. colleges and universities.
- Chinese language school teachers are benefitting from the expertise of the U.S. education system through annual or semiannual workshops; student performance has improved as a result.
- A number of school districts are granting credit to students who study at Chinese language schools.
- Standardized test scores of Chinese language school students are now accepted by some formal educational institutions.

Obtaining Credit from the Formal Education System. Some public high schools will now grant credit to students for classes taken at Chinese language schools. Of the 102 Chinese language schools in southern California, 92 are eligible to apply for credit transfer status, but so far, this status has been granted to only 28 of them. In northern California, 74 of the 87 Chinese language schools may apply for credit transfer; only 9 have actually been granted credit transfer status.

Credit transfer may apply to electives and sometimes to required courses; it can reflect Pass/Fail or a specific letter grade. The number of credits granted for a specific course depends on the degree of difficulty of the course, the rank of the Chinese language school in its region, and the relationship between the Chinese language school and the local school district. In San Francisco, at the end of each school year, the City Bureau of Education offers a number of tests for students of different language levels. A student enrolled in a Chinese language school will be eligible for five credits upon passing the test.

SAT II: Chinese Language Test. In 1994, the American College Board introduced the *SAT II: Chinese*, which measures the language abilities of all students who have taken 2 to 4 years of Chinese in an American high school. Of the students who took the test in 1995, 86% scored over 700 points. Students who took the test attribute their high scores to training they received at home, in Chinese language schools, or in their home country. Chinese language schools are a major source of Chinese language instruction at the K-12 level and help prepare students for courses in advanced Chinese and Chinese literature at colleges and universities.

Conclusion

Chinese language schools in the United States have evolved from private, one-room schools to dynamic, creative, and practical institutions of primary and secondary education serving both the Chinese community and mainstream American society. In 1993, representatives of Chinese language schools were invited to a major conference to participate in discussions on Chinese language teaching. Many educators in Chinese language schools are encouraged by the prospect of getting outside support to reexamine such critical issues as curriculum design, teacher training, materials development, and student assessment.

Chinese language schools should continue to seek national recognition, strive to be a vital link for students of Chinese between primary and secondary education and the post-secondary level, seek out a more active role in mainstream American education, and make greater contributions to Chinese language education in the United States by playing an increasing role at the national level.

Resources

Wang, X. (Ed.). (1996). *A view from within: A case study of Chinese heritage community language schools in the United States*. Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Center.

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